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Even the most nonchalant reader admits that Edgar Allan Poe was more than a little interested in madness; he may be less aware, however, that Poe also dabbled in the dramatic arts. Poe's mix of madness and drama, specifically the substance of revenge tragedy in "The Cask of Amontillado," offers yet another example of his wide-ranging mind and creative propensities. I perceive in Poe's tale a parallel to Elizabethan revenge tragedy.[1] Pointing out that Woodberry calls "Cask" "a tale of Italian revenge," Mabbott states that such feeling embodies "an implacable demand for retribution," which Poe accounts for in the beginning of the tale. As he works out the action and develops the character of Montresor as a revenge-tragedy hero, Poe by means of sound effects proves himself a master of dramatic technique. As Montresor falls deeper into insanity, the ringing of the bells symbolizes his descent.

Montresor's first declaration alerts us that revenge is the central motivation underlying the story: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge."[2] No one will dispute the motivation, yet scholars question the exact nature of the insult. Proponents of a politico-religious interpretation of the story see the insult growing from the tensions arising between the Catholic and the Protestant, the non-member and the Freemason, respectively Montresor and Fortunato.[3] Certainly these factors contribute to the conflict. The insult is, however, the more basic one found in Elizabethan revenge tragedy: revenging an insult to a family member. Noting the connection between Italian revenge and Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Shannon Burns emphasizes that avenging an insult is Montresor's motivation since the tale focuses on family and Catholicism.[4]

This fact is borne out as Montresor and Fortunato wander through the catacombs. When Fortunato comments on the vaults, his companion replies: "The Montresors...were a great and numerous family." Fortunato responds: "I forget your arms." Although on the surface the comment appears benign, Fortunato implies that the family is hardly worth remembering. If the Montresors had at one time been prominent, then Fortunato would surely know something about

the coat of arms. Since the men also have a fairly close relationship, Fortunato should remember the arms. Gargano sees that Montresor is the "vindicator of his ancestors" for precisely this reason. He adds that the coat of arms itself signifies Montresor's avenging his injured family.[5]

The ancestral bones of the Montresors offer another parallel to revenge tragedy. Although not a device always employed by revenge tragedians, ghosts frequently appeared — the spirits of family members visiting the protagonist and spurring him to action.[6] *Hamlet* offers a good example: the apparition of the murdered father urges his son to avenge his death. The bones of the Montresors in "Cask" function as do ghosts in revenge tragedy. Piles of ancestral bones must be removed to expose the crypt; therefore, the bones of the insulted Montresors that cover the place of Fortunato's entombment share in the death of the enemy. Later, when he finishes his brickwork, Montresor replaces the bones; consequently the "ghosts" reach out to insure the burial of Fortunato. Unlike the ghosts in Elizabethan tragedies, the apparitions in "Cask" do not appear and reappear. Instead they are ever-present, constant reminders of the family's history. When Fortunato, drunken and proud, sarcastically toasts his friend's ancestors, he underlines his contempt for the family, living and dead — and both the living and the dead are there to avenge that insult.

Several characteristics in "Cask" align with elements of Gothicism: gruesomeness, terror, horror, and violence. Because of their association with murder and death, the bones also contribute to Gothicism in this tale. Aside from their immediate relationship with physical suffering, they produce this effect through sound: they rattle and so reinforce terror. Noting the revival of Renaissance drama in the late 1700s, Clara F. McIntyre sees borrowings — especially in the blood and violence, revenge, madness, and ghosts — from Elizabethan tragedy in the novels of Ann Radcliffe and others.[7]

Added to these distinct features of revenge tragedy is the presence of the prototypical hero from such drama. Fortunato has gradually victimized Montresor. The victim allows a thousand injuries to pass, and he takes punitive action only when Fortunato insults him. To his listener Montresor emphasizes that he would "at length" be avenged. Avoiding any risks, the protagonist carefully calculates his actions because his being caught and punished could render the vengeance ineffective. The fact remains, though, that Montresor, like a revenge

hero, does delay the fulfillings of his plans. His meticulous engineering of the murder over an unspecified, but certainly not a brief, period causes Poe's vengeance-seeker to brood upon his hatred for Fortunato. Because of his constant agonizing, Montresor's plans become obsessive, leading him to insanity.

In their study of the revenge-tragedy motif, Charles A. and Elaine S. Hallett postulate that "the brutal act committed by the revenge is what distinguishes the act of revenge from the act of justice and makes void all of the protagonist's claims to sanity."[8] This statement sheds light on Montresor's actions; his violent act emblemizes his mental condition.

Many critics believe that the protagonist of "Cask" resembles Roderick Usher and William Wilson. Davidson views Roderick and Madeline as the mental and physical components of one person. Another divided self, William Wilson, confronts his mirror image. He is enraged by his twin's loathsome traits.[9] Montresor is this same type of divided self. Thus, when Montresor kills his enemy, he commits suicide. Ridding himself of Fortunato, he destroys the hated personality traits within himself.[10] Although in his warped mind he views Fortunato as the enemy, in particular his own, Montresor is clearly the sinister figure. He is the plotter, the murderer. Despite his malevolence, however, he is the protagonist of "Cask." Montresor is, then, a hold-over of the Elizabethan villain-hero.[11]

The evidence is sufficient: the protagonist is a split personality — a madman. Without exhaustive characterization of Montresor, the text proper offers ample evidence of his divided self. After he has determined vengeance, he qualifies: "It must be understood that neither by word or deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will." Here is the classic description of a dual personality, the man who does not externalize his feelings. Showing an apparent or ironic good will, Montresor inquires after Fortunato's health as they travel toward the latter's death.

Beginning with the cordial meeting of the two, this journey leads Montresor into madness: "I am on my way to Luchresi." Mabbott interprets the name as meaning "Look-crazy." "Luchresi" recurs, yet the structure of its first appearance is highly significant. The tense of the verb is progressive. On the surface the statement is merely a decoy to lure Fortunato to his death; however, the forward-moving action expressed by the verb structure renders greater meaning. Montresor is on his way to deeper insanity. Even after fifty years of pondering his

crime, he finds no peace of mind. In his descent into madness, the murderer remembers vividly the ringing of the bells. The story of the crime might become distorted after so many years, although the haunting sound of the bells in the last scene between pursuer and victim remains with Montresor. Noting that Montresor views Fortunato as his "mirror image," Sweet states that, when Montresor hears only the jingling of the bells after he yells "Fortunato," those bells signify the insanity of the protagonist.[12] This final chiming marks Montresor's complete descent into madness. The bells sound throughout the story, and each "jingling" furthers the mental breakdown of Montresor.[13]

Recounting his murder of Fortunato, Montresor sets the stage by describing the evening "during the supreme madness of the carnival season." The atmosphere suggests the mental state of the murderer. Like the craziness around him, he verges upon collapse. His long brooding over the method of repaying his adversary has led him to a state of frenzy as he sets his plans in motion. Poe dresses Montresor's enemy as a court jester with "conical cap and bells." Critics see this garb as one of the ironies in "Cask" since Montresor and Fortunato have switched places. Fortunato is no longer the power figure; he is a fool who is now victimized by his former victim. Montresor rises to power before Fortunato the dupe.[14] The costuming is ironic, to be sure, but it serves a dramatic function. The bells on Fortunato's cap ring time and again. With each ringing, Montresor slips farther and farther into his own "supreme madness."

Montresor first mentions the bells as he and Fortunato enter the catacombs: "The gait of my friend was unsteady and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode." Montresor specifically refers to the bells on three subsequent occasions, but his first remark remains significant because it demonstrates his keen awareness of this particular sound. Since they "jingled as he strode," the bells sound more or less constantly. The faint chimes mark each drunken step taken by Fortunato. Montresor would be attuned to the incessant ringing; consequently the bells haunt him fifty years after the crime.

Constantly aware of the bells, he would notice them more on certain occasions. After one coughing spell: "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" (the hacking itself echoing the repeated sounding of bells), Fortunato drinks to the departed Montresors. Again the protagonist hears the bells. Montresor observes of Fortunato as the latter proposes his toast: "He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me

familiarly, while his bells jingled." Fortunato's actions indeed seem to be contemptuous. Once more the aristocrat goes beyond injury to insult, and Montresor more intensely desires revenge.

Shortly, Montresor again refers to the bells, after explaining his coat of arms: "The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled." This statement marks roughly the midpoint of the story. The companions near the place of entombment; Montresor will soon realize his goal. Attaining the prize, though, he will slip into greater unreality. This halfway point signals his halfway point to insanity. When readers note Montresor's third reference to the bells, they should look back to the first: the bells sound at each step. Because of his increasing drunkenness, evident in his glazed eyes, his walk no doubt degenerates from being "unsteady" to staggering. To signify mere unsteady steps the bells would sound with some regularity. By contrast, more halting and unsure steps create a more erratic sound. From soft regular tinkling, they would grow irregular. The bells' more erratic sounds symbolize Montresor's loss of mental stability. Another Poe narrator is likewise lost in "fancy," a word closely associated with illusions and distorted mental activity. When the narrator in "The Raven" begins "linking Fancy unto fancy," he is obviously losing control. Montresor's situation is the same because, the closer he comes to destroying his enemy, the cloudier grows his thinking.

When the men reach their destination, Montresor chains a stunned Fortunato inside the crypt. This scene functions as the play-within-the-play motif of revenge tragedy because it portrays the culmination of the vengeance. Moreover, despite some verbalizing, the episode conveys a sense of pantomime; nowhere are actions so exaggerated. The Halletts suggest that the play-within-a-play reflects the mental state of the revenger by portraying his "mad act." They further surmise that "this motif brings in a world distinct from that of the real world. The separation is represented visually by the creation of a sealed-off space within which the play can be staged."[15] Montresor sets his "dumb-show" in operation, and again the bells figure significantly. The revenge-hero's work with the chain roughly imitates the sound of bells: metal striking metal. This "bell ringing," however, contrasts sharply to the earlier jingles. The bells on Fortunato's cap would emit a light, cheerful tinkling. On the other hand, the ringing of the chain might be heavy and somber. While the amateur mason goes about his work, he hears the "furious vibrations of the chain." The rumblings of the metal prompt Montresor to cease his

labors and sit down to enjoy the success of his plot. When the chains stop rattling, he resumes. His labors are interrupted, however, by "loud and shrill screams." Noticeably affected by these outcries, the protagonist admits that he "hesitated" and "trembled." Regaining his composure, Montresor answers the yells of anguish, returning scream for scream. Finally silence prevails. The type of ringing produced by the chains represents Montresor's going insane; the "mad act" is complete. Surely his tremblings and screamings, much on the order of the scenes in "Tarr and Fether," typify a madman.

After his final exchange with his victim, Montresor hears the bells ring for the last time. Twice calling " 'Fortunato' " and receiving no response, he hears nothing save the jingling of the bells, which sickens him. He attempts to rationalize his sickness as a consequence of the dampness in the catacombs. His state results, however, from the awareness and horror of his sin.[16] Earlier he blamed wine for his declining mental condition, but he rationalizes again. A victim of a diseased mind, he hears the ringing of the bells, emblems of his madness, fifty years after the murder. Gargano states: "Montresor fails because he cannot harmonize the disparate parts of his nature, and, consequently, cannot achieve self-knowledge."[17] Also describing Montresor's failure, Kozikowski sees the man's revenge as "a shambles, a wreckage of the human spirit,...."[18] Recognizing his heinous crime, Montresor cannot escape the horror of the deed. Revenge, madness, and bells echo eternally in his head.

"Cask" testifies impressively to Poe's subtle art of networking his multiform interests and knowledge into a unified work of art. In its compactness this tale offers the full range of Poe's talents: his adept characterization, his careful attention to setting, and his stunning dramatic technique.

NOTES

[1] Scholars debate Poe's knowledge of Renaissance drama. Killis Campbell postulates that Poe knew little about the subject. Other scholars note otherwise. Thomas Olive Mabbott cites some fifteen allusions from Elizabethan drama in *Politian;* Burton Pollin lists numerous references to Renaissance tragedians and their works. N. Bryllion Fagin also credits Poe with wide knowledge of the dramatic arts.

[2] "The Cask of Amontillado" is quoted from *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* 3. vols., ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, with the assistance of Eleanor D. Kewer and Maureen C. Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1978). Fredson Bowers in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940) emphasizes that the essential element of revenge creates the tragic

action in such drama. Furthermore, he states that the hero pursues retribution because of jealousy, injury or insult, or self-preservation and that, as a natural result of vengeance-seeking, he goes insane.

[3] Kathryn Montgomery Harris, "Ironic Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *PoeS,* 5 (1972), 50-51; John Clendenning, "Anything Goes: Comic Aspects in 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *American Humor,* ed. O. M. Brack, Jr. (Scottsdale, 1977), pp. 13-26.

[4] Shannon Burns, " 'The Cask of Amontillado': Montresor's Revenge," *PoeS,* 7 (1974), 25.

[5] James W. Gargano, " 'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *SSF,* 4 (1967), 126.

[6] Bowers, p. 64.

[7] Clara F. McIntyre, "Were the 'Gothic Novels' Gothic?," *PMLA,* 36 (1921), 652-658.

[8] *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln, 1980), p. 82.

[9] Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 198-199.

[10] Charles A. Sweet, Jr., "Retapping Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *PoeS,* 8 (1975), 10; Walter Stepp, "The Ironic Double in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *SSF,* 13 (1976), 448.

[11] McIntyre, p. 665.

[12] Sweet, p. 11.

[13] Another study of the relationship between bells and madness is Richard Fusco, "An Alternative Reading of Poe's 'The Bells'," *UMSE,* ns, 1 (1980), 121-124.

[14] Gargano, p. 121.

[15] Hallet, pp. 90-91.

[16] Stanley J. Kozikowski, "A Reconsideration of Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *ATQ,* 39 (1978), 277.

[17] Gargano, pp. 125-126.

[18] Kozikowski, p. 278.